

The Far and the Near

Thomas Wolfe

The story opens with a description of a tidy little cottage. It is white with green blinds. It has a vegetable garden, a grape arbor, and flower beds. In front of the house are three big oak trees. The house looks neat and comfortable. Every afternoon, just after two o'clock, an express train passes by the house.



Every day for more than twenty years, as the train had approached this house, the engineer had blown on the whistle, and every day, as soon as she heard this signal, a woman had appeared on the back porch of the little house and waved to him.



The woman brings her young daughter to the porch. The girl also waves to the engineer each day. As the years pass, the girl grows up.

The engineer grows old and gray during these twenty years. His own children have also grown up.

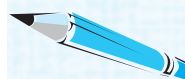
He has seen terrible tragedies on the tracks. One time, his train hit a wagon full of children. Another time a cheap car stalls on the tracks. The people inside are so frightened that they cannot move. Once an old, deaf hobo is walking along the tracks. He does not hear the warning whistle.



But no matter what peril or tragedy he had known, the vision of the little house and the women waving to him with a brave free motion of the arm had become fixed in the mind of the engineer as something beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin, and something that would always be the same, no



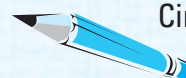
Read Fluently



Read the bracketed paragraph aloud.

Then underline the part that tells what the engineer did every day.

Reading Strategy



Circle the words that describe how the man and his own

family have changed. Based on these words, complete this sentence to **predict** what the man might find out later.

The man will probably find out that the woman, her daughter, and their house have

TAKE NOTES

Reading Strategy

How does the engineer feel about the woman and the house? Based on his feelings, **predict** what will happen next.

Reading Check

How does the man feel as he walks toward the house?

matter what mishap, grief or error might break the iron schedule of his days.



Wolfe goes on to say that the engineer has tender feelings toward the women and their house. He makes up his mind that someday he will go and visit them.

At last that day comes. The engineer is retired. He has no more work to do. He rides the train to the town where the women live. He walks through the station and out into the town. As he does this, he begins to feel strange. It doesn't seem like the same town he saw from the train. He becomes more and more puzzled as he walks on. The engineer walks down the hot and dusty road until he gets to the house. The experience seems more and more like a bad dream. He knocks at the door. Then he hears the steps from inside. Finally, the door opens. The woman stands before him.



And instantly, with a sense of bitter loss and grief, he was sorry he had come. He knew at once that the woman who stood there looking at him with a mistrustful eye was the same woman who had waved to him so many thousand times. But her face was harsh and pinched and meager; the flesh sagged wearily in sallow folds, and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and uneasy doubt. All the brave freedom, the warmth and the affection that he had read into her gesture, vanished in the moment that he saw her and heard her unfriendly tongue.



Vocabulary Development

mishap (MIS hap) *n.* accident

meager (MEE ger) *adj.* having little flesh, thin

sallow (SAL loh) *adj.* sickly, pale yellow

Wolfe describes how the man explains why he came. The woman finally invites him in, but she seems unwilling to do so. She calls to her daughter in a harsh, shrill voice. They have a short visit in the women's ugly little parlor. As the man tries to talk, the women stare at him in a dull way. They seem hostile and afraid.

The engineer feels disappointed and leaves the cottage. He suddenly feels old and sad. The things that he thought he knew were not the way he expected them to be.



And he knew that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's desire, was gone forever, could never be got back again.



Literary Analysis

How does the man feel when he meets the woman? Complete these sentences about the moment of **anticlimax**.

The man is disappointed when he meets the woman because she looks at him

Her face is

Her eyes are filled with

He had thought she was warm and friendly, but

Stop to Reflect

Imagine that you are the mother or the daughter. Do you think their reaction to the man is normal? Explain why you feel as you do.